

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent  
 Trinity Church  
 Matthew 4:1-11

Preparing a sermon takes a lot of work. It takes reading and study and thinking and praying. It is a wrestling-match with the rules and constraints of language. Work on the sermon for this morning began almost exactly forty years ago, 1968, in a classroom at Michigan State University. It would have been in the spring term; very possibly during Lent. Forty years -- the full term of wilderness wandering.

I was teaching the standard required course in the History of Western Civilization, known to generations of college students as "Western Civ." The subject for the day was an excerpt from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, written in 1880. The novel itself is long and involved. I don't know anyone that has read it all the way through. I certainly haven't; but the section we were studying stands out as one of the great pieces of literature in any language.

That particular piece of the novel is a conversation between two of the Karamazov brothers. One of them, Ivan, is a secular rationalist and social activist. A few years later he would be called a communist. The other brother, Alyosha, is an Orthodox monk, a man of faith, and the conversation takes place in his small monastery room. Ivan has visited him for what both brothers know will be the last time. Without going into all of the details, their conversation is really about the meaning of life. Does it lie with Alyosha's simple faith, or Ivan's rational, secular idealism. And in that connection they began to talk about the Gospel account of the dialog between Jesus and the devil -- exactly the lesson for today.

In the reading from Dostoyevsky's book, there is one ringing sentence that grabbed the attention of the class. Ivan says to Alyosha, "...The secret of man's being is not only to live, but to have something to live for." The secret of man's being, the aim of human life, is not only to live, but to have something to live for. It seemed to resonate with those sixty or so young people, and I will never forget the electricity ran through the discussion in that place, on that day.

Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus looking for the meaning of his own life, Jesus wrestling with temptation, Jesus debating with Satan:

We have to recognize that there was only one living human witness to that debate, and that was Jesus himself. (It's sort of like looking at a photograph and wondering who took the picture.) Only Jesus could have told about it. Satan, the Tempter, is a force within Jesus' own human conscience, whatever form that force took, there in the wilderness. The contest came down to three challenges -- three challenges and three responses.

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." The issue wasn't Jesus' own hunger, but the hunger of all humanity -- all of their practical and physical needs. "Give us this day our daily bread ..." It's no accident that in the hipster jargon of our own time, "bread" is a slang term for money! Without knowing it, they've performed a neat piece of biblical interpretation! Give them their bread and they'll follow you anywhere! It's the demagogue's promise, the politician's promise -- and it works.

But Jesus refused. His quiet refusal comes from Jesus' own scriptures his own Hebrew Bible: "One does not live by bread alone, but from every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Moses, Deut. 8:3)

Meeting the physical needs of human beings is necessary in itself, Jesus acknowledges this: "one does not live by bread alone," but bread alone does not lead to the kind of life that the

Christ envisions. The Son of God comes to nourish the souls of humanity -- to enrich their lives with the Bread of Heaven. If Jesus had chosen to gain followers by that miracle, he could not have been the Son of God. Even if the issue were his own cruel hunger, to try to turn the stones to bread would be to abandon his own calling, his own commitment; and if he did that, he would have abandoned his entitlement to be called God's Son. He would have commanded and the stones would have remained stones. That's the Devil's logic, and it didn't work. Jesus refused to fall into the snare.

"O.K." says the Tempter. "If you want to move the discussion to the spiritual level, how about this?" The scene is moved to Jerusalem and Jesus is on the pinnacle of the Temple. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down -- and here is where the Devil quotes Scripture. as the saying goes. He says, 'It is written 'He will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.' " "You have a spiritual safety-net! And look at the miracle the people down there will see! You'll have them in the palm of your hand, for people love miracles."

Jesus' terse reply was a one-liner, also from Scripture: "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." Again, the trap. To gain allegiance by a miracle would be to abandon his saving mission. He would no longer qualify as the Son of God. Gravity would have prevailed -- and Jesus didn't fall for it, if you can stand that pun. Jesus refused.

It all leads up to the final test. This time there is no conditional "If you are the Son of God." This time, the real agenda is revealed in all of its naked force. It is power. Jesus is shown all of the nations of the earth, all of humanity, all of the world's people. The Tempter says, "All this authority is yours, if you will worship me. You will be able to give them everything they want, everything they need. More than that, you will give them the unity they seek, resolve all of the issues that lie at the roots of separation and conflict, give them a single community of worship in which there is no discord or controversy. All it will cost is their freedom of choice, their privilege and responsibility of judging between good and evil and all of the gray discriminations between the "not so bad" and the "could be better." And again, Jesus refused to take the bait. Once again his answer was the words of Moses to his people in the wilderness. "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

History comes full circle: The temptation of Adam and Eve -- our Old Testament lesson today, returns in the temptations of Christ. Strange, isn't it? How the Devil wanted to turn the human condition of perilous, risky, freedom back into the original innocent condition in which God created them. Humanity opted for a freedom of choice in an ambiguous world, the freedom to have a conscience and the sometimes cruel burden of deciding, rightly or wrongly what is good and what is not good.

That is exactly where you and I live today, and that is where the bell rang to end the class that day in 1968. I packed up my papers and walked out into the crowded corridor of Morrill Hall. Two or three students were waiting for me, and they said, "Mr. House, you seemed about to say something really important. Why didn't you?" Now, forty years later, I have another chance to try and say something "really important."

First of all, it is the struggle with our conscience that gives life its meaning, however much we might like sometimes to resign it. That's what freedom entails, and we hear much about freedom these days. And it is God's grace that makes possible our return to the battle. It is the image of Christ, both human and divine, that sets the model for our character, provides the guideline for our actions, and judges our intentions. In him was no flickering shadow of deception. In this is the meaning of human life, which is not only to live, but to have something to live for.

Our temptations are the mirror-images of Christ's own. Our lives are dominated by the thought of bread. Each day's news echoes the need of many and across the spectrum from poverty to wealth there is the angry envy of those who have more. A rare commodity is the practical compassion on the part of many for those who do not have enough. Man lives by bread, but not by bread alone.

We crave mystery. Jesus was tempted in throwing himself from the temple pinnacle to stun people with a mystery. That would be a deceit. It would draw the minds of men and women away from the true mystery that is God. Jesus knew that and preferred the mystery that is real and true; not mystery that is used as a method of control, as the devil would have it.

I cherish mystery. There is mystery in the sacraments and worship of the Church, even the simple Lord's Supper that we celebrate today. That is a marvelous, life-giving mystery; but there is also temptation in it: Are we seeking the mystery that lies at the heart of God, or do we seek mystery simply for its own sake, its spiritual fascination, or the feeling that in ritual acts we become somehow different and better than other human beings.

Just a suggestion: There is a semi-delirium that comes with long fasting in wilderness places -- others have had that experience and told about it. With Jesus in that condition, might it have been, not the devil tempting Jesus, but God himself? Doing that would allow Jesus to prove himself, confirm his priorities and outline his saving mission -- to prove to himself that he was the Son of God.

The temptations were not over for Jesus, any more than they are for us. They must have come back again and again as Jesus faced human fatigue and the blows of human rejection and misunderstanding, until the final one, the last temptation of Christ: In mockery that dark day on Calvary they said, "If you are the Son of God, that haunting phrase once again repeated, If you are the son of God, come down from the cross." Once again Jesus refused. And in that mighty refusal, you and I are saved.